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A closer look at the relationship between socioeconomic status and childcare

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A closer look at the relationship between
socioeconomic status and childcare

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A closer look at the relationship between socioeconomic status and childcare

Abstract

Childcare quality varies visibly across the five boroughs of New York City. The quality of childcare centers is very different for families of lower socioeconomic status. Most families of higher socioeconomic status tend to have access to centers that offer higher standards of childcare. The reason for this gap can be the result of many different explanations such as: small pools of childcare choices (family day care versus center-based care), poor regulation of family day care by governing agencies, inadequate teacher or provider training, parents with limited knowledge of what high quality childcare should look like, inadequate amounts of government subsidized care and the high cost of high quality childcare.

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Introduction: Why is this problem so important?

The location of a childcare center in New York City has a significant impact on the quality of care provided. According to researchers, it is apparent that children of lower socio-economic groups are more likely to be placed in low quality childcare arrangements. Currently there are several factors that influence the quality of care in New York City. Those factors are: the necessity for better childcare provider and teacher training, structural inconsistencies and policies that do not enforce a better quality of care, not enough government sponsored programs such as Head Start or Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) and limited amounts of government issued childcare subsidies for financially eligible families. I think that exploring the root of this problem of childcare quality is important because the imbalance between the affluent and the less affluent is not only a social injustice but it is proven through extensive research that the long term effects of low quality childcare can be very harmful. This gap in childcare quality can lead to improper social emotional development, and long terms problems such as poor school performance, teen pregnancy, alcohol and/or substance abuse. Addressing this problem will be beneficial because healthy, well-rounded children are more likely to become healthy well-rounded adults that make positive contributions to society.

This issue resonates with me personally because I am a mother of four children and I have had my own personal experiences with very good and very bad childcare centers. As a teen mother at the age of 17, I was lucky to have the option of placing my daughter Aubrey in the care of her paternal grandmother while I attended high school and worked each day. Each day, I knew that when I left my daughter in her grandmother's care, she would be the recipient of high quality childcare because she was showered with enormous amounts of love and attention. My theory proved to be correct because Aubrey's grandmother ensured that she ate healthy foods,

she played with her, they sang songs together, read many books and went for walks in the neighborhood. I was very fortunate to have this arrangement for about two years for free; until the circumstances of life forced me to move from the Bronx, away from her grandmother to Queens which was much too far away to continue our child care arrangement. I was then faced with a dilemma, “Without family support, what quality of child care could I afford as a young, single mother of at the age of 19, while working at McDonald’s for minimum wage?”

One day while out for a walk in my new neighborhood, I came across a local Head Start program. It piqued my curiosity and I stepped inside to ask for information. The staff was warm and welcoming. The classrooms were clean and organized, and the teachers were educated. They had a front yard with playground equipment that I knew my daughter would absolutely love to use. They also had an awesomely well-rounded curriculum, which consisted of arts, dance, science, social studies, and trips. It was not just a childcare center, but also a place that we would eventually come to know as home. For me it was a double blessing, because due to my low income it was free. I could now work each day worry free and take my daughter to a high quality child care center in my neighborhood without breaking the bank.

My daughter came home each day raving about the program and the day’s activities. Her teachers communicated with me on a daily basis and they shared exciting activities and ideas with me that I could do with her at home. I saw the quality of the center not only in the thoughtful artwork on the wall, or the performances that they gave, but I also saw it in the sparkle of my daughter’s eye each day as she gushed about her favorite teacher, Ms. Olejnik and the way she was never ready to leave when I came to pick her up. I thought to myself, this place is magical. I often tell parents that the true mark of an educational institution’s excellence is the children are never ready to go home. They always want more of that school because it a good

place to be and it is filled with loving, talented educators that young children are ultimately drawn too.

Issues impacting access to high quality childcare

Currently New York State has the second highest rate of childcare costs in the United States. According to the Parents and the High Cost of Child Care 2013 report, “Families of three in New York living at the poverty level would have to pay almost 58 percent of their income for full-time care in a family childcare home for an infant” (Wood & Kendall, 2013, p.15). As you can imagine, 58% is a very high and unreasonable number especially if your income is only \$200-\$300 per week. Based on those salaries of most working class New Yorkers earning minimum wage, 58% for childcare would be roughly \$116-\$174 per week, per child. Where does that leave room for purchasing food, clothing, paying rent, or utilities? Even households with dual incomes would struggle with such a burden.

I remember the period when my daughter Aubrey was two years old and waiting for her age to be Head Start eligible, and I had to look for childcare that was not only affordable, but also convenient. That is another factor that comes into play far more often than quality when parents choose care for their children. Will I be able to drop my child off at this center early enough and still be able to make it to work in a timely manner? Cost and proximity were on my mind as I scoured the neighborhood for programs. Finally, I found a center that was not only directly across the street from my job but it only cost about \$65 per week. At the time this price tag was all that I could afford because I was only earning about \$150-\$200 per week, at most. I was elated. However, I did notice some things that I was slightly uncomfortable with. First, the center which was a family childcare center was very crowded. I saw about 15 children, maybe

more on my visit. The owner quickly explained that this was because her husband also worked with her and so they were allowed to have more children. I never checked this out for myself, partly because I trusted her and mostly because I was desperate and it was all that I could afford. I did not have much time to visit centers and I knew that she would soon begin to attend Head Start. My daughter attended this center for several months and then I encountered two very big problems. First the owner, I will call her Barbara, refused to give me her tax identification number when it was time to prepare my taxes. She informed me it was because she was giving me her “special discounted rate” therefore I was not eligible to use her business information to claim her childcare services on my taxes. I believed Barbara’s bogus story and continued to send my daughter anyway, because I felt that I needed her and I was exhausted from commuting back and forth to the Bronx. The final and most upsetting problem was the last day I went in to pick up my daughter after work. Barbara seemed very upset and I wondered why. She then informed me and several other parents that she had to close that day. I was slightly confused, and I thought she meant she had to close early for the day, but I was wrong. Barbara proceeded to explain that she had been given a shutdown notice from the Department of Health due to unsafe child to adult ratios. In other words, the reason why I received Barbara’s special discount rate was because she had entirely too many young children in her care. She had been warned before but this time the whistle was blown and the Department of Health served her with a legal document demanding that she shut down her business immediately or risk facing civil penalties, showing indeed they meant business.

This phenomenon is not uncommon. Many childcare centers are cutting corners in similar ways that Barbara did in order to make a few quick extra bucks and because they clearly do not understand the Department of Health and their reasoning for the childcare regulations in the first

place. Currently in New York City, family day care such as the aforementioned and many childcare centers are licensed and regulated by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Bureau of Day Care. The document that explicitly outlines day care regulations is contained in Article 47. This document describes the requirements for family day care and private childcare centers, including child to adult ratio based on age, licensing requirements, education and experience requirements, and daily schedule or curriculum. As a young parent my main concern was my ability to work daily and provide for my child; I was totally unaware of these regulations. Had I known, I would have proceeded more cautiously with enrolling my daughter. However, some children and parents were not so lucky. A particular case in New York City history relative to not properly following childcare regulations at a family day care comes to mind:

On Aug. 11, 2004, the 6-month-old child, Matthew Perilli, was napping unattended in his playpen on the second floor of Devlin Day Care in Forest Hills. Ms. Zlotshewer found him under a pile of toys, not breathing. Prosecutors said that there were two 3-year-olds in the room at the time and that one of them told the police that they had piled toys on top of Matthew. Responding to questions from Judge Eugene Lopez, she admitted to breaking several child care regulations set by the city, including supervising six more children than regulations permitted, having two uncertified employees, and leaving some children unsupervised. She declined to make a statement in court and avoided reporters afterwards. Matthew's parents, Maria and Vincent Perilli, read prepared statements. Mrs. Perilli called Matthew 'a beautiful baby, our most precious gift and a joy to behold' and 'an utterly joyous and cherubic child. We saw you as a loving and caring

person, a mother yourself, and you convinced us that you could care for Matthew. If you couldn't do this, then you shouldn't have accepted him into your care'. (Kilgannon, 2005)

The statements made by Matthew's parents echo the sentiment of many New York parents that leave their children in childcare everyday so that they can attend work or school and provide for their family. We trust child care workers sometimes entirely too much and as a result, our children are put in harm's way. I was a lucky parent because that childcare center attended by my daughter was shut down before such a tragedy could take place during a random inspection by the Department of Health. However I think of the thousands of New York parents that have not been as fortunate, and the childcare centers that break similar regulations but will never be reprimanded because they are very good at masking these illegalities.

Low-income parents are often the most affected by such an epidemic. They many times do not want to ask questions about concerns they may have for fear of losing their childcare slot or because it is culturally inappropriate to challenge authority figures. Their number one priority becomes, "Can I go to work today because my childcare is secure?" Childcare quality is usually much lower on the list, although it is critically important. According to Wood and Kendall (2013), "while quality childcare has a positive benefit on all children, the impact is particularly strong for children in low-income families. High-quality programs provide more benefit and low-quality programs have a greater negative impact" (p.10). The authors further state, some of the benefits of high-quality programs are: "measurably better language or vocabulary, reading, math skills, applied problem solving, better executive functioning (ability to organize information, pay attention, remember details and make plans, and better skills participating in a group (ability to take turns, wait before speaking, work well with others and cooperate with

peers). Some researchers suggest that non-cognitive skills are particularly critical for school success” (Wood & Kendall, 2013, p.10).

Due to their low income, some parents are more likely to enroll their children in low-quality childcare centers. Most of these parents can only afford to place their child or children in family day care, which are significantly cheaper due to the lower operation costs of running a home-based business. Center-based care is usually higher in quality but often inaccessible for families of lower socio-economic status, unless they have government assistance through grants and vouchers to help subsidize the costs. Wood and Kendall (2013) state, “The U.S Department of Health and Human Services considers 10 percent of family income for childcare as a benchmark for affordable care. Yet, the survey results show, many families spend significantly more than 10 percent of their income on childcare” (p.14). The authors then go on to explain the tremendous cost of care disparity between family day care and center based care in the state of Oregon. “The gap in cost between centers and family childcare homes can be large: In Oregon, the cost difference between care in a family childcare home and center based care for two children an infant and a four-year-old was nearly \$11,000” (2013, p.14). Equally disheartening is their list entitled Top 10 Least Affordable States for Center-Based Infant Care in 2012. New York ranked number two on the survey right behind Oregon. The table illustrates the state median income for a New York single mother family to be on average \$25,883 and the average cost of center-based care to be \$14,939 (Wood & Kendall, 2013, p.14). These figures are based on 2009-2011 census bureau data. They are high figures and this does not take into consideration the many New York City families living below the poverty level that may never receive a childcare voucher or a slot in a government subsidized program such as Head Start or UPK.

What does high quality child care look like?

Quality comes in many forms when working with young children, but there are certain factors that are universal and non-negotiable for proper cognitive, social-emotional, and physical growth and development. These factors are: well-balanced nutrition, a clean, organized and safe learning environment, language-rich interactions, opportunities for daily creative experiences, a print rich environment, and a warm, attentive child care provider. QUALITY Stars NY (2014), a voluntary quality rating and improvement system for all types of early childhood programs in New York State, cites four key areas of quality in their parent brochure. Those key areas of quality indicators are: learning environment, management and leadership, staff qualifications and experience, and family engagement. The authors go on to describe the learning environment more in depth as such, “The space where children play, learn and grow. In a quality program, spaces are clean and inviting. Children look happy and busy. Equipment, materials and planned activities stimulate learning. Adults are listening to, talking with (not at), and enjoying interacting with children” (QUALITY Stars NY, 2014). Their website additionally states, “In a quality program, staff have strong backgrounds in child development and early education and respond to children’s needs to enrich their learning.”

So why does quality matter? According to Peisner-Feinberg and Burchinal (1997), For children of more advantaged families, quality of care is not related to developmental outcomes because their background circumstances buffer them from the harmful effects of poor quality care, whereas the quality of care is positively related to outcomes from children from less advantaged families. Quality of care is positively related to developmental outcomes for all children, but the effects are stronger for children from high-risk backgrounds (p.454).

Head Start programs are often higher quality than family daycare programs because they are regulated by the federal government. According to Magnuson and Waldfogel (2005), “According to a recent study of Head Start, programs met or exceeded recommendations of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, a leading group of experts in the field) for class size and adult to child ratios” (p.171-172).

How can we ensure equal access to high quality childcare for all?

Better regulations for family day care centers by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services would help to alleviate some of the negative side effects of low-quality child care by requiring higher licensing standards. Currently family child care providers have the following basic educational and experiential requirements for licensing: 2 years of paid or unpaid experience caring for children under 6 years of age (including your own) or 1 year of paid or unpaid experience caring for children under 6 years of age and 6 hours of training or education in early childhood development (OCFS, 2014). This page included in the New York State Family Day Care licensing packet is the bare minimum out of a 123-page application packet. Is education least important when it comes to caring for our young children in family day care? Many of the children, mostly of low socio-economic groups will stay in family day care until they enter Kindergarten and yet be expected to compete academically with their same aged peers. An assumption is made that these children will be able to handle the pressures of fulfilling the goals of an ever-increasing Common Core curriculum. Center-based providers have stricter educational requirements including Bachelor’s and Master’s Degrees in Early Childhood Education. I think it is safe to say that well-trained, educated staff that has a proper knowledge of child development and is better able to meet the needs of young children.

The expansion of successful center based early childhood programs such as Head Start and Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) would also help more low-income children to have guaranteed access to a higher quality of child care. Head Start not only provides high quality early childhood education for young children ages three to five, but it also helps to elevate the quality of family life by providing informative workshops for parents, job training, social services, and so much more all on site. According to Casper and Thalheimer (2010), “Head Start is the longest running federally mandated program for young children in the United States. By 2008, nearly 25 million children had benefited from Head Start. The involvement of parents and other family members is integral to the program” (p. 197). Head Start is an effective federally subsidized program with proven positive long terms program effects. By expanding existing Head Start programs and increasing government funding to these programs, we would be on our way to a great start to help support families. One barrier still remains, because Head Start is an income eligible program, in order for a family to be able to attend Head Start, the family must be living at or below the current federal poverty line or the child must have special needs. Eliminating or adjusting the income eligibility guidelines would open the program up for many more families that just miss the cutoff and even middle class families that are struggling as well but not income eligible.

UPK is another program that has recently begun to expand throughout New York and the nation after the positive effects of attendance have been observed. “Many longitudinal research studies have reported the benefits of a quality early childhood education, beginning with the Perry Preschool study (Karoly, Kilburn, and Cannon 2005), and this research has helped to convince both Democratic and Republican legislators to support UPK” (as quoted in Casper and Thalheimer, 2010, p. 199). Another benefit of UPK is it is not income based, hence the name

Universal Pre K. Everyone can attend UPK but only as long as there are spaces available in programs that offer it. In many states, New York included there are not enough UPK spaces for all children that are eligible. Many children that reach the age of four and could attend UPK because they are age eligible do not because there is a long waiting list. Increased support from our state government would help to set aside and direct funds into more community based organizations that often handle the overflow of eligible students.

Government support of childcare subsidies would enable parents to have increased access to high quality childcare centers. They would help to buffer the high costs of childcare, especially in New York City which has the second highest rate of childcare cost in the nation. In several European countries such as Switzerland, Sweden and France the government is instrumental in the development and financial maintenance of childcare centers. According to Meiksins and Sweet (2008), “The quality of and access to childcare in American society pales in comparison with many countries in Western Europe, which have implemented national childcare programs that provide high subsidies to fund publicly financed childcare centers, which in turn promotes high use” (p.79). Not only are government backed childcare centers beneficial because they promote increase usage by the public; the educational standards are also often higher for childcare workers employed by these centers. Meiksins and Sweet (2008) go on to explain, “Because most childcare workers in Sweden are well paid and have university degrees, virtually all working parents can go to their jobs assured that their children are receiving high quality care” (p.79). The sentiment is shared worldwide that government should work together to ensure equal access to high quality childcare, yet why has it not happened? In some countries such as the aforementioned Sweden, France, and even Finland the government not only subsidizes childcare but they also support many family friendly policies relative to work and family medical

leave. The United States has yet to follow suit with these progressive policies. According to Lombardi (2003),

Child care is not a private responsibility, but must be a public service. Like any public utility, child care requires public financing to provide access to all families. It cannot continue to be funded by parents alone or financed on the backs of child care providers. We need an infusion of public support to make it work. Although families create children, if we want every child to have an equal opportunity to succeed in this world, they must be given an even playing field. Parents that must work low paying jobs for long hard hours should not be required to pay the same amount of money for child care services as their middle or upper class counterparts. Paying enormous amounts of money for the opportunity to work and then spend it all on child care is an unfair issue that we are asking our families to take on alone (p.36).

Closing thoughts: My Head Start success story

As a parent of a child that was a Head Start participant I reaped the benefits of her participation in our local Head Start program. Not only was she supported by her college educated teachers as she learned how to be more social and how to communicate, but she also was able to create beautiful projects that have been saved by family members for years to come; she also has positive memories of a stable and well run child care program that was subsidized by the government. Today my daughter Aubrey is a senior in high school and she has been accepted to several colleges. In the Fall of 2015 she will be attending the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut as a Political Science major and I am 100 percent positive that it is because of the love, support, and creative outlet she was able to have through Head Start. She ate

nutritious foods and took trips that I would not have been able to afford otherwise as a single parent.

Though this is commendable in itself, the most meaningful connection between Head Start and myself is not only the support that my daughter received, but also the support that I received as a parent. They made sure that we had free bus service so that I could make it to work on time each day. If I did not have money for food or other necessities, they connected me with community resources so that I did not have to worry about those things, and I could just focus on trying to be a good mom. The final, but most special gift Head Start provided me was the gift of parent involvement. I became a parent volunteer at my daughter's school in 2000 shortly after she began attending the program just helping out in the classroom, setting up snack or cleaning up after an art project. I used to hang out in her school in the daytime because my night job at McDonald's meant that I would not be able to see her until sometimes 12 am when I finished my shift. This became a way for me to spend quality time with my daughter and also an opportunity to bond with her teachers and the school family worker, Ms. Lee. One day I was informed that my daughter's Head Start program would be offering free training classes for parents that were interested in changing careers or finding a job if they were unemployed. Among the choices were dental assistant, home health aide classes, and the Child Development Associate credential (CDA), which was advertised particularly for those interested in becoming family child care providers. The last option piqued my interest and I signed up for it. What did I have to lose? I could learn something new and spend more time with my daughter if I worked from home. I fell in love with the course immediately after it started and began volunteering full-time in a two's and three's classroom at the Head Start program in order to fulfill my requirement for experience working with young children. Upon completion of this yearlong program, I received my CDA

credential after being taught by one of the best instructors from Bank Street, Ms. Arlene Uss and I was thrust into the brave new world of teaching. Less than three months after completion of the program, I was immediately able to quit my job at McDonald's as a night manager, and I became an Assistant Teacher at a local UPK program, earning a higher salary and the opportunity to spend more time at home with my child. This experience has changed my life and all for the better. I continued to further my education because the teachings that I received about child development were so powerful, that I wanted more. Not only did they help me to become a thoughtful teacher but a good mother as well.

After a five-year absence from college, I returned to The Borough of Manhattan Community College CUNY and earned an Associate's Degree in Early Childhood Education. I went on to earn my Bachelor's Degree in Sociology in 2011 from Herbert H. Lehman College CUNY, graduating at the top of my class. In the Fall of 2011, I was accepted into the Bank Street College of Education, Early Childhood General and Special Education program coming full circle back to the institution that helped me to fall in love with teaching 11 years before. In May 2015, I will be graduating with my Master's Degree in Early Childhood General and Special Education. Additionally, I am currently a Special Education Kindergarten Teacher at a progressive charter school in the Bronx, seeking to give back to the communities that have given so much to me.

Head Start empowers parents and raises their current and future quality of life. As Casper and Thalheimer (2010) state over a third of Head Start staff, "are parents of current or former Head Start children. Through the Child Development Associate (CDA)...teachers can move up the educational ladder to acquire bachelor's and master's degrees and become head teachers, educational coordinators, and administrators within Head Start" (p.198).

I am grateful for the investment made in me by the Head Start program and I am a living testimony that Head Start can work and does work. I am sure that there are countless other stories that have yet to be told, but this is my story. I am a Head Start success story and also an example of why investment is needed in poor communities. Not only did Head Start believe in me and support me every step of the way as I fought to climb the ladder of success in my life, but Bank Street believed in me as well. What they probably thought was just another community partnership through the fee waivers I received as a parent, the excellent foundational and progressive teachings of early childhood development, I saw as a life changing investment that I will be forever grateful for. These are the stories that our government should want to be of for the children that we teach today and will lead this world tomorrow. These are the stories we should strive for when we make financial investments and provide positive family supports to financially struggling families, single parents, and those that do not have extended family that they can rely on.

I can only imagine where I would be in life had it not been for strong early childhood programs like Head Start and quality community outreach programs offered through Bank Street and so many other progressive education institutions. The United States as a whole must first modify its' view of government help as a model of dependency and instead see it as a model that is designed to support American citizens and ensure the cultivation of more productive members of society for all classes. Childcare is an institution that not only affects the children on the receiving end but also the world in which these children grow up to work in and raise their very own children. I feel that we have a very important question to ask ourselves as professionals, government officials, politicians, and leaders of the United States: Do we want to set up our citizens for excellence from childhood by ensuring that everyone has equal access to high quality

childcare or would we rather place this financial and emotional burden on parents and risk the gamble? Some children are caught in a never ending cycle of poverty because our government has failed to set up and support a successful childcare model for families in our nation even though we have nations that have their very own system that is working and we have failed to adopt ideas that work. Government support on all levels is imminent for high quality childcare to become an American reality and to be available to all. I believe that it is said best in these final statements,

Access to quality child care is uneven, expensive, and often inadequate (Children's Defense Fund 2005; Heymann 2000). Today, low-income workers commonly lack access to good child care arrangements, and the middle class feels the financial pinch as well. One possibility is to follow the model offered by Finland and France, which have publicly funded high-quality day care facilities to help working parents remain in their jobs (pfau-Effinger 2004). Instituting such changes in America will require demonstrating that child care centers can offer care that is as good (or better) than that which is received in the home. Establishing these centers will require directing public resources to constructing buildings, hiring trained personnel, and compensating them at the professional-level wages that care work deserves (as stated in Meiksins and Sweet, 2008, p.187).

Parent checklist for childcare quality

According to the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), Division of Child Care Services parents should be concerned with the quality of childcare provided to their children on a daily basis. When looking for childcare in New York, These are

some 'helpful tips' they give on their current website. Beneath a section entitled, 'Maintaining Quality' the OCFS lists several factors that can help to assure high quality in childcare programs.

Parent Involvement - As a parent, you are a key to quality childcare. You have the right to drop in at any time to observe the program or to see your child. You will probably see the provider often and have a good idea of how things are going in the program.

Adult-Child Ratios - Regulated programs must limit the number of children each adult cares for based on standards set in the regulations. These standards help to ensure that children are properly supervised and get all the attention they need.

Training and Experience - Regulated childcare providers must have prior experience caring for children and must receive ongoing training in areas such as safety, nutrition, and child abuse prevention.

Regulation and Oversight - Programs regulated by the State Office of Children and Family Services must be licensed or registered. With only a few exceptions, every program that cares for more than two children three hours or more per day must have a license or registration certificate. When you visit a regulated childcare facility, ask to see the license or registration certificate.

Inspections - Every licensed childcare program must be inspected at least once before each license renewal. At least 50% of all registered providers are inspected annually.

Complaints - The state Office of Children & Family Services (OCFS) maintains a statewide, toll-free Child Care Complaint Line at 1-800-732-5207. Anyone can file a complaint of a possible regulatory violation in a day care program by calling this number or the nearest regional OCFS office. In New York City, complaints also can be made to the city Department of Health at 212-676-2444 (OCFS, n.d.).

While these tips certainly are worthy of some honorable mention, they are certainly not exhaustive or specific enough for parents that are walking into centers trusting that the best care is being provided for their children. They are also very broad and general guidelines that make no differentiation between family-based childcare centers and center-based childcare centers, which are two very different types of programs. Furthermore, if parents only adhered to New York State's OFCS 'standards of quality', then almost every family day care center in New York would be considered 'high quality' because these bulleted aspects are the minimum requirements for licensing for all family day care centers in New York City. I also find it vaguely disturbing that the OCFS overtly states, "There is no absolute guarantee of quality in child care programs (OCFS, n.d.)." Why is there no guarantee? Why does the State of New York continue to support this dynamic by not increasing licensing standards? Why are programs such as Quality Stars New York, which help to enforce higher standards of quality in childcare centers strictly voluntary and not mandatory? Why are childcare centers not required to be members of an early childhood organization such as NAEYC and attend ongoing professional development opportunities offered on an ongoing basis through these entities? There is no absolute guarantee of quality, because the licensing agency does not enforce quality. They enforce, paying a fee and filling out a 123-page packet of paperwork that addresses a minimal standard of care for thousands of New York City children under the age of five that attend family day care. I feel that our children are worth far more than that. They are worth more than one year of experience caring for a child, including your own but never having any in class professional early childhood training. They are worth a childcare provider being required to take a Child Development Associate course or coursework of higher educational standards, which properly provides

childcare providers with foundational knowledge relative to the growth, and development of young children.

Several other factors that parents should consider when visiting childcare centers:

- Do teachers or providers greet the children by name, with a hug, smile or thoughtful comment each day? Do the workers seem happy? How long have they worked at that center?
- What is the educational background and experience of the childcare providers or teachers? Are they college educated? Do they have experience working with children that have special needs?
- Do children have the opportunity to engage in physical activity daily?
- Is the classroom or space used clean and organized?
- Does the childcare center have a curriculum that it uses? Is it child centered?
- Does individual and group reading take place daily?
- Do the children have daily art and music experiences?
- Do the children participate in sensory activities (finger paint, play dough) on a daily basis?
- Are the children at the center encouraged to talk openly and to be problem solvers?
- Do activities that take place such as art or science encourage children to be creative?
- Is artwork labeled with the child's name and displayed where children and adults can see?
- Do children eat nutritious foods daily?

- How many children and how many adults are present at the same time? Does this ratio meet city and state guidelines? (Helpful hint: The more adults that are present and the less children that present the higher the quality of child care tends to be.)
- Are parents welcome and encouraged to participate in the program on a regular basis?
- Does the program belong to an early childhood organization such as the NAEYC?

The more of these descriptive qualities that your child care center meets, usually the better the quality that is offered to young children and the families that are served.

Appendix A

Helpful Parent Websites and Resources

Department of Mental Health & Mental Hygiene

- **Child Care Complaint Hotline/Línea de Quejas sobre Cuidado Infantil**
- **1-800-732-5207**
- **311 or 646-632-6101 in NYC**
- www.nyc.gov/health

New York State Head Start Association, www.nysheadstart.org

National Head Start Association, www.nhsa.org

New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute, www.earlychildhoodnyc.org

New York's Quality Rating and Improvement System for childcare centers and parent resource center, www.QUALITYstarsNY.org

Office of Children & Family Services, www.ocfs.ny.gov

Early Care and Learning Council, www.earlycareandlearning.org/childcare

Appendix B

If you are interested in starting a letter writing campaign or joining forces with other concerned parents about this childcare equality issue, please contact your state senator:

Gillibrand, Kirsten E.- (D-NY) Class I

478 Russell Senate Office Building Washington DC 20510

(202) 224-4451

Contact: www.gillibrand.senate.gov/contact/

Schumer, Charles E.- (D-NY) Class III

322 Hart Senate Office Building Washington DC 20510

(202) 224-6542

Contact: www.schumer.senate.gov/contact/email-chuck

Sample Letter to Your State Senator

Your Name

Your Address

Your City, State, Zip Code

New York State Senator

Kirsten E. Gillibrand

478 Russell Senate Office Building

Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Gillibrand,

I am very concerned with childcare cost and quality in New York State. I am a **(single/working class/middle)** class parent that struggles to pay the cost of childcare. My current income is \$25,000 **(your income amount)** per year and I pay \$175 per week for childcare, which

is roughly \$9,100 (**what you pay for childcare**) per year. I struggle each month to make ends meet due to this large part of my budget. Not only is the childcare that I pay for expensive but it is also substandard. I would like to put my child in a childcare center but I cannot afford to pay the \$300 per week that they charge. I like childcare centers better than family day cares because they offer music classes, art experiences, science and so much more. At my daughter's family day care, they do not have these experiences even though I would like them to. I have tried to enroll my child in a local Head Start, which offers a higher quality of care, but it is filled to capacity. I am eligible for a childcare voucher through the state, but the waiting list is very long. Please work on my and other families' behalf to help issue more childcare vouchers for eligible families. You could also help by opening more Head Start and other high quality, government backed early childhood programs for working parents so that we can ensure a better future for our children. Thank you.

Sincerely,

(Sign and Print Your Name Here)

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